The American Sârâph

An Unnatural History of Winged Snakes in North America

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Even in today's decidedly cynical and rational culture, legends and alleged sightings of exceptional and mysterious creatures are still—on occasion—featured in the news media, and dominate the 100-realm of our libraries' Dewey decimal classification section. In the modern age, the "big three" cryptozoologically dominate: Sasquatch, lake monsters and the Chupacabra. Rewind the clock back 125 years though and a new "top three list" of whispered-about mystery creatures emerges from North America: "Wild men of the woods" (likely an early nomenclature for what will later come to be known as Bigfoot), sea serpents and…**Winged Snakes**

If one were to design the simplest animal that would generate the greatest commotion among the public at large, the winged snake might be the ideal conception. Coalescing the most ominous features of two of the most traditionally feared critters—the snake and the bat, the idea of the existence of winged snakes was, historically, a nineteenth century hullabaloo just waiting to happen.

The idea of a serpent that can fly is by no means a contemporary concept. The classic Chinese dragons, though wingless, were built upon this notion. The belief peaked perhaps in ancient Egypt, where numerous examples of winged snakes can be found depicted in tomes of all types from the region. These were, ostensibly, not merely for dramatic graphic illustration. The prominent historian Herodotus wrote about these animals as actual biological components within the Egyptian ecology. Consider the following passage from his *History of Egypt, Book 2.* Chapter LXXV:

> *I went to a certain place in Arabia, almost exactly opposite the city of Buto, to make inquiries concerning the winged serpents. On my arrival I saw the back-bones and ribs of serpents in such numbers as it is impossible to describe; of the ribs there were a multitude of heaps, some great, some small, some middle-sized. The place where the bones lie is at the entrance of a narrow gorge between the steep mountains, which there open upon a spacious plain communicating with the great plains of Egypt. The story goes, that the spring the snakes come flying from Arabia towards Egypt, but are met in this gorge by the birds called ibises, who forbid their entrance and destroy them all. The Arabians assert, and the Egyptians also admit, that it is on account of the service thus rendered that the Egyptians hold the ibis in so much reverence.*

While many historians dismiss this passage as a misguided connection to swarms of locusts, it is problematic to reconcile this explanation with Herodotus's reference to having been witness to their "bones" and "ribs". Similarly damning is the fact that Herodotus described their wings as bat-like rather than feathered as a bird. Others reject the account as a mere fable to explicate the Egyptians' reverence for the ibis.

The *Bible* too mentions these creatures in Isaiah 30:6 and refers to them as "*saraph*", often translated as the "fiery flying serpents". The "fire" here referring to their poison's burning sensation.

> *The burden of the beasts of the south: Into the land of trouble and anguish, from whence come the young and old lion, the viper and fiery flying serpent, they will carry their riches upon the shoulders of young asses, and their treasures upon the bunches of camels, to people that shall not profit them.*
>
> (Isaiah 30:6 from the *King James Bible*)

In the seventeenth century, the belief in the existence of these animals was waxed through a proposed hypothesis on the conception of natural chimeras. Edward Lhwyd, curator of the Oxford Museum, suggested that—captured in the natural processes of evaporation and precipitation—snake semen could fertilize nest-bound bird eggs to produce a blended beast, a process he termed "fermentational putrefaction". While Lhwyd's idea was not new, it did resurrect and adjust slightly the older principle of the "spermatick principle" proposed by the 16th century Andreas Libavius. Both the "fermentational putrefaction" and "spermatick principle" theories were geared towards fossil formation; they have also been connected to the chimera formation. Today, the idea is zoologically implausible, but one must ask why such a conjecture was even needed if there were no documented sightings of such organisms.[1]

In North America?

The Arabian Peninsula does not have an exclusive claim to these mystery animals by any means. Accounts of such creatures stretch as far back as the United State's westward expanding history. Admittedly, the believability of the existence of such an extraordinary North American cryptid would have been made far easier had the roll call of known sightings revealed marked similarities; alas, the reports vary from the mundane and minute to the inordinately bizarre. In a brief review of some of the prominent sightings, the reader will be guided from the former to the latter.

The earliest known recorded sighting can be found in the journal writings of Hieronymus Benzo, an Italian naturalist who traversed the New World from 1541 to 1556. In his text *Istoria de Mondo Nuovo Libr. III*, Benzo included the following entry on an expedition into what is now Florida:

> *I saw a certain kind of Serpent which was furnished with wings, and which was killed near a wood by some of our men. Its wings were so shaped that by moving them it could raise itself from the ground and fly along, but only at a very short distance from the earth.*

The next known flap of sightings emerged from the area of Leavenworth, Texas and, in fact, culminated in the acquisition of a sample specimen. In August of 1875, an unnamed woman dwelling in the southern side of this town made local headlines with her insistence that a smallish winged snake was undertaking excursions over her neighborhood. So astonishing was her testimony that a local, aged psychic was stirred to boldly foretell (to the local newspaper) *"in a short time the air would be full of flying serpents"*. Perhaps, if the next 35 years might be interpreted as "a short time", she was partially right.[2]

In September of that same year, two young men surnamed Remington and Jenkins, while hunting in the woods near Leavenworth, were astonished to see this oft-gossiped about creature soaring straight toward them at an altitude of about four feet. Jenkins quickly removed his cap and, with an accurate sweep, netted the little beastie. It turned out to be quite harmless; it was approximately one foot in length, spotted and bore wings approximately the size of their hands. After dispensing of it, the two intelligent lads brought the now lifeless body home and preserved it in a jar of alcohol. Tragically, this essential physical specimen appears to have been lost to time, most likely in much the same manner as myriads of copies of *Action Comics #1* have been innocently tossed by mothers with other attic junk, without realization of what they possessed.[2]

Another diminutive winged snake was witnessed by an entire family, that of H. C. Cotton, of White County, Tennessee. The creature nonchalantly soared over their home as they were all upon their porch in August of 1899. An Atlanta, Georgia newspaper commented upon the story by noting *"the coves of White County are famous for the production of a fine quality of apple brandy. Whether this had anything to do with the phenomenon or not is not stated."*[3]

A slightly larger and more alarming specimen was observed over St. Charles, Missouri, not far from the Mississippi River in 1911. Mrs. John Bishop and her children were startled from their work and play by an odd sound evocative of a monoplane. This buzzing though was not from an engine, but rather from the highly rapid fluttering of a sizeable pair of wings attached to a three-foot-long spotted snake passing over their residence. The awe that overtook the unsuspecting family quickly transformed into terror however, as the airborne snake turned and approached the terrified group of witnesses. The mother hastily herded the children into the home where they watched in safety as the creature performed various aeronautic feats for almost twenty minutes before it disappeared over the horizon in the direction of Alton, Illinois.[4]

Farm hands working on what was one of the most renowned plantations in King George, Virginia, "Berry Plain", did battle with a winged snake in September of 1905 and emerged victorious. The enigmatic reptile had been seen many times on the plantation—always in flight or arboreal, never terrestrial—prior to its demise. The beast was five feet long, one inch in diameter and possessed wings "of good size" covered with something that resembled feathers. The plantation was located on the banks of the Rappahannock River; thus, locals surmised that the creature must have *"come from an impenetrable marsh of the river or some neighboring creek"*.[5]

More outlandish yet was the monster witnessed in Greensburg, Indiana in September of 1893. While riding in a buggy, Mrs. Joseph Groswick and Mrs. Casper were literally pursued for most of a mile by a seven-foot winged serpent that emerged from a roadside tree. In addition to its inexplicable wings, the two women claimed that it also possessed a beak like an eagle. By providence a chance encounter with a pair of hunters and their dogs persuaded the beast to abort its fearsome chase and flee back into the woods.[6]

In 1914, an American Indian of the Seminole tribe named Jim Sanitu traversed the country with his "trophy", the fully mounted skeleton of a large winged snake that he claimed to have bested in a battle in the Everglades.[7]

Figure 1: Artistic representation of the battle between a Seminole in Florida and a winged snake.
From *Decatur Review*, Decatur IL, October 14, 1917

Just Prior to the turn of the nineteenth century, the *New York Times*, ran an expose on the rare sighting made by Robert McDougall, described as "*the most prominent citizen of Waterford [New Jersey]*". Startled while strolling through the woods, McDougall reported s five-foot winged snake, flapping its wings as it descended from the low branches of a nearby tree.

"*It had the look of a bat in its face*," said McDougall. "*But it was a flying snake, sure enough. One of a venomous kind I would say. The skull resembled that of a puff adder…I have seen all sorts of things in my time, but never before did I set eyes on a monster like that.*"

Apparently, a man named Hiram Beechwood, who witnessed it crossing a road entering a swamp, spotted the creature again just a few days later. He noted that its wings appeared to be bat-like in design, as opposed to avian.[8]

They might be giant

The labeling of a winged snake's head as being similar to a puff adder's was echoed less than a month later by a subsequent sighting hundreds of miles down the Atlantic coast. This was clearly not the same animal though; this new critter was far more a monster by any definition of size and shape. Once again from the Everglades, it was described as bearing a head shaped like a puff adder's, possessing a dark, bluish body that was estimated by the witness as being up to thirty-five feet in length and boasting not two, but four wings—the arrangement of which was left unstated. Like many of the sightings already described, the commotion created by the report spurred locals to form a posse to eliminate the terrifying threat. Unfortunately, also similar, was the lack of success that this mob suffered in the ensuing search.[9]

This was not the only North American *giant* winged snake ever reported though. The *Times-Independent* of Bedford, Iowa told the tale of a local man named Lee Corder and his late summer 1887 encounter with an enormous flying snake. When he and a group of people he was with at the time first sighted it in the distance, it appeared to him to be a large buzzard-like bird. It was not until it flew much closer that the creature's undulating serpentine body became obvious. The snake was described as being nearly a foot in diameter, with great glistening scales. While watching it with astonishment, the snake landed with a thud in a cornfield approximately one hundred feet away, but out of sight. The men's fear prevented them from investigating into the field further and prompted them to take a quick leave of the area. The local paper challenged any who might belittle this result to "*call on Lee Corder, or any of the family, who reside five miles from this city, [so that] they may be convinced of its truth, as they are people of unimpeachable veracity.*"[10]

South Carolina alleged its own giant aerial serpent in 1897. Witnessed twice in the same day at locations twenty-two miles distant from each other, this huge winged beast was described by both witnesses as being anywhere from twenty-five to forty feet in length and eight to ten inches in diameter though its largest part.[11]

They came from the water?

The idea of a snake with wings seems anomalous at best if viewed from an evolutionary perspective. Would not wings be a serious detriment to the burrow-dwelling nature of a terrestrial snake? Likewise, it does not seem plausible that the lop-sided, elongated serpentine body could be advantageous to flight. The only way such a combination could be viewed as logical—and perhaps beneficial—would be in the context of a *water* snake that could take to the air as necessary. Along that line of thought, a couple important sightings of large winged water snakes were documented in the media.

The *Washington Post* noted in 1911 that the:

"passengers and crew of the White Star liner Celtic brought with them to New York today a revival of the sea serpent tales of other years. They reported having passed early yesterday morning a formidable looking creature that was going at a high speed in pursuit of a school of young whales. The monster, they say, had wings, and rose frequently 10 feet or more from the water. Whales and pursuer faded from sight within a few minutes."[12]

What would appear to be, by description, the same or a similar animal was witnessed a few years earlier in the Allegheny River in Pennsylvania. A local newspaper account noted that:

"Miss Rachel Talbot, daughter of W. A. Talbot, who has a summer villa opposite Grunderville, was the first to see the creature as it came swimming up the middle of the river. The head protruded several feet above the surface. She called to 'Hank' Johnson, ferryman for the Warren Lumber Company, who ran for his rifle and opened fire. Immediately the reptile reared its head at least 10 feet into the air...and charged for the shore. Jackson steadied himself and, taking careful aim hit one of the wings, disabling it. The snake flew as high as the ferry cable which hangs 20 feet above the water and then vanished."[13]

Not really 'wings'?

An intriguing variation on the mythology, and anecdotal history of North American winged snakes, is the contemporary investigation of Northern Arizona University anthropology student Nick Sucik. Sucik has been delving into the Navajo and Hopi legends that tell of snakes, or snake lake reptiles, known as the *Tl.iish Naat'a'i* that can take flight and undulates in various movements in that motion. In 2004 Sucik issued a paper, *Exploring the Prospect of an Unidentified Species of Reptile within Navajo and Hopi Lands* that nicely bridged the fields of theoretical herpetological physiology and cryptic anthropological folklore.

Sucik's flying snakes of Arizona were hypothesized to be wingless—by definition of bat or bird—but capable of limited aeronautics through extended flaps that stretched over a significant portion of their bodies. Sucik outlines his findings regarding the lack of "wing" like appendages as follows:

The wings undoubtedly are the most peculiar feature, even if they technically may fall short of the definition. Those only having heard of the snakes tend to assume they sport bat-like wings, whereas witnesses mostly have described something far differing. Instead of possessing limbs, the animals sport a retractable membrane that emerges from behind the head and then trails back to either side along a significant portion of the body length. Some have likened it to the expansive display of a cobra.s hood, though both much larger and longer. This membrane is faint in color, almost to the point of transparency or, as one woman put it, .like they were made of plastic. Thus, the membrane may tend to go unnoticed, creating the surreal image of a snake magically "slithering" through mid-air.

It is difficult to reconcile this statement however with the sightings presented previously, especially those that lasted for dozens of minutes or even produced a type specimen carcass.[14]

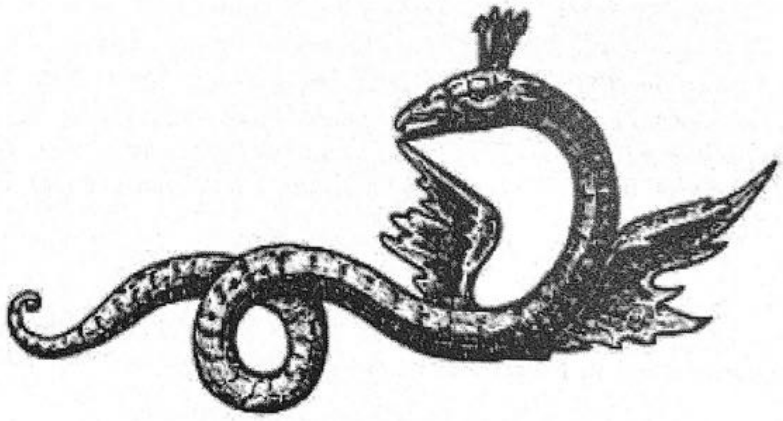

Figure 2: Sucik located this image of a North American winged snake in celebrated Dutch naturalist and illustrator Crispijn de Passe's engraving entitled America. The reader should notice 1) the ambiguity of the wings as to their bird-like or bat-like quality, 2) the apparently beak-like mouth, as noted in the 1893 Indiana encounter and 3) the head dressing of some sort that may have lead to the Native American conception of "horned", winged serpents known as uktena.

The Winged-snake Platypus

Our world does not seem to like chimeric critters. When the first drawing and pelt of the world's most celebrated chimera, the platypus (*Ornithorhynchus anatinus*) was delivered to British naturalists, it was mocked as an obvious hoax, with the renowned natural George Shaw even attacking the pelt with scissors in a vain attempt to expose the seams of this fraud.

The world has always been filled with wonders and without a doubt, these magnificent animals--be they cryptids or tall-tales—certainly made the world a more wonder-filled place.

The winged snake may be one of history's most notorious mass-perpetuated hoaxes; if not, the extraordinarily rare species is certainly extinct. Nevertheless, let us not take the figurative scissors of skepticism to the winged snake too hastily.

Reference Sources

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He has done extensive research writings on the case of the Mad Gasser of Mattoon, Illinois, 'big cats' in central Illinois and the giant bird phenomena over Illinois, including projects on the 'Piasa Bird', the Lawndale incident and Audubon's giant Washington Eagle.

Scott's work can be seen at these selected locations,
http://www.swampgasbooks.com/ ,
http://biofort.swampgasbooks.com/ ,